

CHARLES BARTLETT

Senators Weigh Quiet Probe of CIA

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is intentionally maintaining an air of indecision toward Sen. Eugene McCarthy's proposal to investigate the Central Intelligence Agency, but behind this noncommittal facade the senators are poised for a close review of CIA operations.

The extent of the inquiry which Chairman William Fulbright has in mind is hinted by the committee's request for a 48 percent increase in its budget for the coming session. With this \$65,000, special staff can be hired but the senators are anxious to conduct their probe without the drumbeats of publicity and public interest which such an event would normally inspire.

The wisdom and importance of avoiding a circus has been brought home to the senators by clear evidence that the Communists are campaigning to convince the world that the CIA is a spuming fountain of evil machinations. The campaign is going so well in the underdeveloped world that responsible senators are reluctant now to give public expression to whatever uncertainties they feel about the CIA's operations.

Sen. Stephen Young, Ohio Democrat, showed the consequences of such expressions last October when he returned from Saigon to assert that CIA agents are staging raids and massacres upon South Vietnamese peasants under a camouflage which causes the Viet Cong to be blamed for the incidents. This amazing charge by an American senator has been shrilly

parroted ever since by Communist propaganda outlets.

The progress of the Communists' campaign is marked by the readiness of major Western publications to mull over charges that the CIA was involved in the murder last October of Mehdi Ben Barka, leader of the Moroccan opposition party.

The slaying occurred in Paris and an intense investigation has implicated intelligence officers, police and officials of the French government. The affair is a major scandal but absolutely nothing in the revelations to date suggests that its entanglements reach beyond the web of French-Moroccan relations.

However, a leftist Rabat daily asserted five days after Ben Barka disappeared that American police had been wary of his planning for the Communist conference in Havana this month.

Le Monde, the most serious newspaper in France, reprinted this inference immediately and it was elaborated two days later in an article in a Gaullist weekly, which pointed flatly to the CIA as the most plausible suspect.

The charge has been echoed repeatedly in the French press for the past two months. The Communists have gleefully picked it up, and the State Department was even asked last Thursday to comment upon it. The remarkable persistence of this innuendo, unsupported by any shred of evidence, attests to the world's widespread readiness to suspect the worst of the American intelligence agency.

The public relations problem which derives from this readiness is well recognized within the government but no solution is in sight. A formal change in the name of the CIA would briefly complicate the work of the Communist propagandists. But the key task of sustaining public respect for the agency's work is an elusive one. It is difficult even to establish the veracity of the CIA's claim that it has never set out to assassinate anyone.

"Success cannot be advertised; failure cannot be explained," President Eisenhower told CIA personnel as he praised them in a public ceremony in 1959. John Kennedy took frequent pains to let the public know of his respect for the agency. Dean Rusk spoke recently of the gallantry and competence which the CIA exhibits in the Cold War's "back alleys."

Such endorsements by officials entitled to know what the CIA is doing are the agency's only possible answer to its critics. The virtue of the inquiry planned by the Foreign Relations Committee is that it may serve to enlarge the circle of men who can stand up and state from intimate knowledge that the CIA is a crucial and responsible contributor to the nation's international interests.

The senators' determination to pursue their probe in elaborate secrecy is a sign that they understand the delicacy of their undertaking. They can bolster the agency with a careful, private inquiry; they can destroy it with a public spectacle.